

April 8, 2009 - Pennsylvania Lawmakers let Light Shine on Federal Budget Earmarks

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Pennsylvania lawmakers let light shine on federal budget earmarks

By Debra Erdley, TRIBUNE-REVIEW

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Members of Western Pennsylvania's congressional delegation are asking for special earmarks in the 2010 budget for everything from locks and dams to a \$45,000 greenhouse garbage composter.

And for the first time their constituents can check on them on the lawmakers' Web sites — if they can find them.

The lawmakers' requests were all posted on the Internet along with the sponsoring member's name Tuesday morning. But there was little consistency in the postings.

While some lawmakers had the information on their home pages, others posted them a click or two away among "issues" or "press releases."

Often derisively referred to as congressional pork, earmarks are budgetary expenditures lawmakers direct to specific projects that are approved without public debate or competitive consideration. Until recently, the sponsorship of such grants has been hidden in the budgetary process.

In a move designed to improve transparency, members were required to post their earmark requests last weekend. For now, the requests are just that, applications for funding in a budget that is months and many votes away from approval.

Even so, Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Commonsense, an anti-waste advocacy group, said the Internet postings were a long time coming.

"We've been advocating for this for years. ... Now taxpayers get to see when their elected representatives sign on the dotted line and say this or that is a wise use of tax money," Ellis said.

There's a wide variety in what and how many projects for which lawmakers requested funding.

Rep. Kathy Dahlkemper, a freshman Democrat from Erie, kept her list relatively short, seeking funding for 20 projects ranging from \$12.5 million to consolidate mass transit services in Erie to \$100,000 that would upgrade communications equipment at the Armstrong County Emergency Operating Center in Kittanning.

At the other end of the spectrum, Rep. Mike Doyle, D-Forest Hills, applied for 115 earmarks ranging from \$45,000 for a greenhouse composting center for the Pittsburgh Jobs Corps to \$93 million for repairs to the locks and dams on the lower Monongahela River.

Rep. Tim Murphy, a Republican from Upper St. Clair, and John Murtha, D-Johnstown, the long-serving dean of the Pennsylvania delegation, also included requests for the Mon River lock and dam project.

Rep. Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, sought \$35 million for work on the Emsworth lock and dam on the Ohio River. He also asked for \$50,000 for an Aliquippa program for at-risk youth.

Doyle and Murtha both defend the much-maligned earmark process.

Doyle spokesman Matt Dinkle said his boss averages 150 to 200 requests every year from constituents.

"Mike's always been proud of it. It's an important part of what he does. He thinks transparency is great. He wants people to know what he's done," Dinkle said.

Likewise Murtha, who has come under fire for sending earmarks to political supporters, insists the grants are not deserving of the black eye they've received.

Spokesman Matthew Mazonkey said it is hard to estimate how many of Murtha's earmarks will be approved. "Obviously since he is a senior member and an appropriations cardinal, more of his requests make it through the process," Mazonkey said in an e-mail.

"I believe that elected representatives of the people understand their constituents and districts best. The responsible application of earmarked funds has widespread benefits for our communities, our state and our nation," Murtha said in a statement prefacing the 70 requests on his Web page.

Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Blair County, posted 98 requests for earmarks, but his endorsement of the process was less ringing. In a preface to his disclosure, Shuster noted he was posting the requests in line with federal guidelines and issued a caveat that his office would not be responsible for any inaccuracies in information provided by the groups

requesting the money.

Although posting requests represents progress, it is far from sufficient to ensure the wise use of tax dollars, said Leslie Paige, spokeswoman for Citizens Against Government Waste.

"There's no vetting, no hearings, no debate before earmarks are awarded. The end user is not always identified. There are no demands for reporting requirements, no demand for oversights until something goes wrong," she said.

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